

# New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the Tri-State area

An affiliate of American Atheists & Center For Atheism

WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG

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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

## PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

### A Religious Street Sign in Brooklyn Sets Off a Media Barrage for NYCA

*All Hell Breaks Loose as Story Goes Nationwide*

I have just been through one of the most harrowing weeks of my life and it's all because of a street sign in Brooklyn.

It started rather simply: A reporter from a small weekly newspaper, *The Brooklyn Paper*, called NYC Atheists to ask what we thought of a new street sign that had just been installed on the Brooklyn street where a Fire Station that had lost seven of its firefighters on 9/11 was located. The new sign renamed the street "Seven In Heaven Way" to honor the firefighters who died.



Seven in Heaven Way Sign

The reporter asked, did we Atheists disapprove of the new street name? We certainly did disapprove! It perpetuates the false concept of a "heaven," and it says that's where you go if you die a hero.

The Brooklyn reporter conducted phone interviews with both me and David Silverman, president of our parental affiliate, American Atheists. We both cited the need for separation of church and state in all of the City's street signage and we called upon City officials to remove the "Heaven" sign and replace it with a secular one.

#### Better: 'Remember the Seven from 9/11'

"The sign implies that heaven actually exists," Silverman told the reporter. "People of all faiths died on 9/11, not just Christians. Heaven is specifically a Christian place. For the city to come up and say all those heroes are in heaven now is not appropriate. All memorials for fallen heroes should celebrate the diversity of our country and should be secular in nature. These heroes might have been Jews, they might have

been Atheists. The U.S. is a melting pot."

In my interview with the reporter, I offered a new name for the street, a secular one that memorializes the firefighters and is, in many ways, clearer: "Remember the Seven from 9/11." It even rhymes.

#### Phones Ringing Off the Hook

Both Silverman and I thought that was that. It was a nice little story that gave us an opportunity to explain separation of church and state and tell the local residents what Atheists thought about their signage.



David Silverman

Then pandemonium broke loose. Suddenly our phones started ringing off the hook. It must have been a slow news week, or somehow the story had hit a sensitive note nationwide. Was it the perceived sacredness of the 9/11 tragedy? Before the week was up, we were inundated with requests for interviews from Fox News, TV's Channel 2, Channel 5 and Channel 11, WABC-AM, the Michael Medved Show, Alan Colmes, The Hannity Show, and from media as far away as station KOMO in Seattle and Station CJAD Radio in Montreal!



Pablo Guzman

Each day in the week of June 20 to 24, we were besieged by reporters; each day both Silverman and I split the news field, sparring with newscasters, telling our story against the often hostile comments of our interrogators, defending our patriotism, arguing that secularism is the way to go on a public street sign.

On one day alone, I had three media interviews---a personal interview out of doors with Pablo Guzman of Channel 2, Michael Medved at 4 p.m. and a radio interview with Station KOMO in Seattle at 11 p.m.

### Flooded with Hate Letters

It was a harrowing week, filled with entrapment attempts by predatory reporters as well as angry voices across the nation accusing us of being unpatriotic and of not honoring the dead firefighters. Then came the hate letters and crank phone calls. Our director of communications, Jane Everhart, fielded scores of phone calls from readers and listeners all over the country and she soon learned when to hang up quickly.

Overnight, some 28 hate emails poured in, most of which said things like “May god have mercy on your wretched soul,” and “You’re a disgrace to the human race”--and those are the only samples without four-letter words. When they are angry, it seems, religious people can string together a whole litany of four-letter words.

There were some good letters too--we have published one in this newsletter (see page 6)--and some encouraging phone calls from fellow Atheists. But what became clear to me, after a few interviews by belligerent newscasters, was that we needed to have a strategy in responding to the media.

This street sign story was, I realized, what we call “opportunistic” publicity. That is, we had not sought this publicity. It came to us by itself, probably because a reporter in Brooklyn hit a hot button with a purely local story. I decided that we could turn this around to create positive publicity for Atheism. True, it would be an uphill battle, since some 85 percent of media commentators are considered conservative and eager to show us in the worst light, but I felt that by treading carefully we could turn this to our advantage.

### Developing a Media Strategy

Using our very first interview as a lesson, I identified our vulnerabilities: (1) We were being accused of not being patriotic because the street sign we opposed was about the 9/11 heroes, (2) We were being confronted with the fact that many places in the U.S. have religious names--San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Jose, Corpus Christi, Bethlehem (PA), the implication being: So what’s wrong with religious names? (3) We were constantly being asked, why did you not object *before* the sign was installed? (4) We were accused of wanting to curtail freedom of speech or religious expression.

I knew from previous radio and TV interviews that most media questioners begin with a controversial challenge or trick question. And I realized that, confronted with the

national sensitivity about our 9/11 heroes, I had to be extremely careful not to confuse the issues. So the strategy I evolved was that right after an interviewer welcomed me to his show, I would do two things: (1) Thank him or her for inviting me (message is, we’re friendly, not combative) and (2) make an opening statement upfront, right away, that Atheists are *totally supportive* of the remembrance and the honoring of any and all who died during the 9/11 tragedy.

This strategy seemed to be extremely effective. I noticed a long pause from most of the interviewers after I started with an opening statement; apparently, it took the wind out of any of their accusations that we are not patriotic. Alan Colmes of Fox News tried to stop me during this opening statement on his radio show. I held my ground--I told him I would answer any and all questions after I finished my statement. It worked. And it knocked out any question he might have had on the patriot issue.



Alan Colmes

### Answers to Tricky Questions

With this in mind, I strategically planned my responses to the other questions we knew would be asked, including the following:

**Why did we not protest the street sign while it was in the planning stages?** We did not know about it until the *The Brooklyn Paper* called me. There are dozens of these City Council meetings in New York City every week and we cannot possibly go to all of them.

**Do we advocate changing all religious names of U.S. cities?** My response is “No.” Though the old practice of naming cities after Catholic saints is unfortunate, it is unrealistic to try change the names now. Besides, the names have often lost their original meaning. Nobody thinks of San Francisco as the city of St. Francis; if anything, they think of San Francisco as city-where-many-gay-people-live. However, I explained to the media, Atheists are now drawing a line in the sand and saying, OK, in the future, no more religious names.

**“Heaven is not a religious word.”** I had to pull out my dictionary for this one. The number-one definition of heaven by Encarta World English Dictionary Online is: “A place of supreme happiness and peace where good people are believed to go after death and, especially in Christianity, the dwelling place of god and the angels.” Bingo!

**“The First Amendment does not restrict religious signage or displays. It only deals with the establishment of religion by the state.”** This question is a toughie because, technically, the religionists are right: The First Amendment only deals with the non-establishment of a state church and says that the state will not prohibit or interfere with anyone’s way of worshipping.

But there are court cases that clarify the First Amendment and establish precedents. On a number of radio and TV shows, I brought up one of these cases, the famous *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) case in Philadelphia, which dealt with the issue of the government giving money to parochial schools. This precedent-setting case not only denied government money to parochial schools but established the concept of separation of church and state and restricted religious displays in public spaces. For more than 40 years now, courts have used the famous “Lemon Test” to prevent displays of religion on public property.

Clearly, the Brooklyn street sign promotes religion by what in advertising circles is called “product placement.” That is, the public display of one of Christianity’s alleged rewards, heaven, is up there for children and other vulnerable people to view, sanctified by the city government, which paid for the sign with our tax money and placed it there. The street sign is another example of religious messages constantly forced on the public, including “under god” in our pledge of allegiance and “In god we trust” on our money. And can you remember any politician’s speech that didn’t end with a pandering-to-religion “God Bless America?” Atheists have been fighting these subliminal (and continual) ads for religion for years.

Most advertisers have to pay for product placement; it costs them a lot of money to have their product put on a table in a movie or a TV show. Here, the advertiser (Christianity) has its product placed *free* on a street sign that is paid for by the city government. The authors of the Lemon test must be whirling in their graves.

However, most of my opponents in radio and TV had never heard of the Lemon Test; in one instance, in which I went to the news outlet’s studio to be interviewed, I witnessed a scurrying of underlings trying to do quick research on the Internet on the Lemon test even while the live show was in progress.

**What about the concept of freedom of speech for religionists?** This was a strange misconception on the part of supposedly informed media people. While it is true that we are all guaranteed freedom of speech and freedom of expression in America, it does not include

advertising or promoting your specific religion on public property or in public buildings. I often mention the case of Alabama Judge Roy Moore, who was forced to remove from his court house a standing sculpture bearing the 10 commandments. Also, most people forget that nobody has *total* free speech; as in other countries, American citizens are not allowed to slander or defame someone.

### Lessons from Week of Living Frantically

It seemed that the week of June 20 - 24 brought one obstacle course after another for me. Yet, we all learned a lot. I learned to have someone from our organization listen to the radio show or view the TV program to which I’ve been invited as a guest. One NYCA listener told me that on the hour-long Michael Medved radio show, my response to one of Medved’s provocative statements had been cut off by the radio station going to a commercial, and my response was never aired after the cutoff. Medved’s somewhat damning comment remained dangling in the air, unchallenged.



Michael Medved

I learned that the belligerent entrapment tactics of the media are designed to get an angry outburst out of the interviewee. Nothing provides a good show as much as two contentious antagonists shouting at each other. Some of our viewers and listeners congratulated me that I managed to remain calm and positive during the interviews; I can assure you that staying calm allowed me to think better and faster on camera or on the air.

I learned that we cannot always choose our fights in the media--and when the media wants to spar, we must, like any pugilist, be trained and ready. We must train by reading the articles emailed to us each week by NYCA’s FOCUS to learn what is going on in Atheism. We must watch conservative religious TV shows to learn their positions and arguments. I became convinced that NYCA’s street tabling is probably the best practice in the world for future dealings with the media.

Finally, I decided that once we have the attention of the media for any reason, let’s use it to get our message across. We should not let the moderator of any radio or TV program detour us from that message with his own agenda.

So went my week of living frantically. And how was your week? ☐

## Editor's Q and A

# What Is the Atheist Movement's Score On Racism, Sexism and Ageism?



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

I know you are fervent about disclosure and transparency of every Atheist group's political stance but how do you feel about the Atheist movement's scorecard on the three big American "isms,"-- racism, sexism and ageism?

--Peter from Park Slope

Dear Peter,

I can't speak for the other Atheist groups, but in line with our bus-poster motto, "You Don't Have to Believe in God to Be a Moral or Ethical Person," NYC Atheists Inc. tries to be fair, inclusive, equalitarian and even a little ahead-of-the-curve in acting on our belief that all people are created equal.

We do not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, age, nationality, sexual preference, size, national origin, income level or what religion you came from. If you have been to our meetings and lectures, you know we embrace a diversity of people ranging from Big Eric (who amuses us all when he says he represents four minorities--size, sexual preference, Jewish origins and the disabled) to Matthew Chapman, British-born grandson of Darwin. But let's take those "isms" you mentioned one at a time and examine what our record has been:

### **Racism**

I think NYCA has a pretty good score on racism. Just in the first six months of this year, we have had three Black lecturers speak at our Brunches: Radcliffe Mason in March told us about his personal road to Atheism; in June, Ayanna Watson introduced us to her new organization, Black Atheists of America, and this month, journalist Jamila Bey from Washington DC is speaking to us about "Atheism in the African-American Culture."

We've also had people of other races speak to us about their experiences in Atheism. In April, Japa Pallikkathayil, a New York University professor whose ancestors hailed from Sri Lanka, gave an interesting talk to us about government coercion.

And it seems that almost every year, we have someone from the Gora family, founders of the India Atheist Centre in Vijayawada, India, come to speak to us.

NYCA president Ken Bronstein and I were frequent visitors to the Harlem Black Atheists group led by Sibanye until his untimely death. We are currently in the planning stages to help Ayanna Watson's Black Atheists of America do street tabling in Harlem, probably on the central thoroughfare of 125th Street, loaning her our tent and equipment.

I must add here that I think Black Atheists should be in charge of their own organization, programs and goals, and white people should not be seen as leaders of the Black Atheist movement. I am fully confident that Black Atheists are capable of being their own organizers and leaders and don't need or want help from white people. My strong feelings on this stem from my early organizing days in the Women's Liberation movement when men would come to our meetings and presume to tell us how to run our movement. We finally had to tell them, "Look, we appreciate your interest, but we are capable of running our movement ourselves, thank you. We might make mistakes, but we'll learn from them."

Besides, the Black experience with religion is very different from the white experience. So my message to our Black Atheist friends is: "We're here to help if you need us, but you do it your way."

### **Sexism**

I regret to say that our score on sexism is not as good. It is a notorious statistic in the Atheist community that women are a small percentage of our movement; estimates have been from 20 to 30 percent. A check of NYCA's membership rolls shows that 35 percent of our members are women. Several years ago, NYCA tried to organize a women's caucus but it withered away from lack of interest.

Why this is, I don't understand. Religion impacts women even more than it impacts men: it keeps women subservient, doesn't allow them equality in the

religious hierarchy, isolates them in nunneries, relegates them to the back of the bus or to childbearing. Why aren't women fighting back? Why do women cling to an institution that oppresses them?

The answer lies, I think, deep within our society's institutions. First of all, having made women second-class citizens, religion basks in their resulting wimpiness. "The meek shall inherit the earth," we are told. Churches have created a legion of followers who will go on to indoctrinate their children into religion. It is a self-perpetuating cycle. For example, although I managed to resist my devout Catholic mother's religious example, my daughter did not--and fell victim to religion's siren call.

Second, the churches offer protection to women as compensation for their subservience. As a woman psychologist at the Des Moines American Atheists convention put it, churches provide "control of men by other men." Women don't fear abandonment or mistreatment as much when the male is under the control of the church's rules.

Third, churches provide needed services to women. Or as Black Atheists of America's Ayanna Watson put it, "Women often need to hold down two or three jobs just to make ends meet. The church provides trusted, reliable child care services for them."

The church's services continue as women age. A few years ago, I walked into a Catholic church for the first time in years just to see if things have changed since I left Catholicism. No, there was still the dank smell of incense, the flickering candles, the tortured body of Christ hanging over the altar, the painfully lugubrious organ music. Then I noticed something interestingly different: The pews were filled mostly with old women.

Think about that! After their children are grown, after these women have become widows, they appear to be even more dependent on the church. They are old and lonely now, their friends are dying off. All they have to turn to for companionship and community is the church. Jesus, they have been led to believe, does not hold it against them that they are old and poor. Priests, I've heard, often befriend and comfort these older women in the hopes of a legacy.

But there is yet one more reason why I think women have not over-run the Atheist movement. I was at another group's meeting a year ago and asked a young man sitting beside me why he thought there is a shortage of women in the Atheist movement. "Look," he said, pointing toward the discussion leader, who was calling on people from the audience, "the women aren't given a chance to speak. The men dominate every meeting. They talk louder and more aggressively and drown out the women."

Reader, you'll be glad to hear that after much complaining on the part of this writer, NYCA now has a decent audio system and a hand-held mike that allows women to speak just as loudly as men do.

That's only a beginning. We still have more work to do to rescue women from the clutches of religion.

### Ageism

On ageism, I am proud to say, the Atheist movement is superb. I personally believe that ageism is the worst of all the "isms" because everybody faces it eventually--whites, Blacks, rich, poor, male and female--all will become old and be subject to discrimination. Or worse, they will be trivialized or made invisible. When one is young, it's hard to believe that ageism is a discrimination problem. Old people tend not to complain about being treated as second-class citizens. But ageism does indeed exist, even in the Atheist movement.

For example, some years ago I received an open invitation to go to an Atheist picnic at Half Moon Beach in Virginia. The invitation said, in part, "And because we all agree on Evolution and stem cell research and the First Amendment, we don't intend to inflict any hour-long speeches on attendees. Besides, there are lots of organizations that provide that--their turnout is typically 20 people or less and average age is 60."

I was incensed and emailed back to the perpetrator of this "invitation" the following:

**"I want to protest the ageism in your communication. What is wrong with the average age of members of Atheist organizations being 60? By saying what you did, you are pandering to a youth-oriented society. I am happy to be part of an Atheist organization where people of experience are respected and enjoyed...Three cheers for people over 60!"**

Did this response teach the party-thrower anything? Apparently not. He wrote back a response that showed me the deep schisms between young and old in our society:

"My first experience to Atheism was at the Washington Area Secular Humanist group. Someone was giving a talk about atheism, and I was the youngest in the room by about 30 years (I was 27 at the time.) Everyone was bored, falling asleep and looking out into space. Immediately I wondered what the hell I was doing in an atheist group... My first impression didn't deter me, however, and we utilized Myspace, Facebook, Craigslist and Meetup.com to bring a lot of fresh new faces into the group and into atheism ...as do many of the other young leaders, such

as the Rational Response Squad.”

Well, I didn't bother to answer his explanation but if I had to do that today, I would point out that the Rational Response Squad is defunct today, destroyed by the cunning Internet trolls and by having to get paying jobs. I would also point out that the problem at the writer's first atheist meeting was not the older members but, rather, a boring speaker. Solution: Get interesting speakers!

I believe that we become our true selves when we age. In NYCA, some of our best and brightest, our most hard working and dedicated to Atheism are our

seniors and our retired people. They have had the fullness of experience to know that religion is phony stuff and they are willing to march, picket, lobby or strike for the truth. They are dependable and generous, they don't need to find paying jobs, they don't need to be afraid that their boss might disapprove of their actions, they don't care what anybody thinks of them. Bravo our handsome, vigorous, courageous, intelligent, delightful seniors!

All in all, we've done pretty well in the Atheist movement, don't you think? Two positive scores out of three in dealing with the most-disgraceful "isms" in our society isn't bad. ☐

## Letter to Editor

To Ken Bronstein,

Last night I listened to you on the Michael Medved show, and I thought you did great. He tried so hard to make you slip up and to pull out an inconsistency in your statements, but he could not, and I could tell he was getting totally furious. He does that with all his guests who are not in line with his agenda.

It was very nice to see you make Mr. "High and Mighty" crack.

Keep up the good work.

*--Rob Gadston - Manhattan*

**YOU CAN TRUST  
AN ATHEIST**

**This newsletter is published by  
New York City Atheists Inc.  
Publisher – Kenneth Bronstein  
Editor – Jane Everhart  
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**You don't have to believe in god  
to be a moral or ethical person.**

**JOIN  
NYC ATHEISTS - FACEBOOK  
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/New-York-City-Atheists/187304681037>**

The New Generation



Ron Widelec and his son, Joshie, show a similar taste in haberdashery. Dad, an educator based on Long Island, is one of our regular contributors to NYCA's newsletter.

**How to Be Non-Threatening to a Religionist  
By MarieAlena Castle**

I have great success by telling people I'd be happy to believe in god if I could find one that is up to my moral standards. As jaws drop, I explain that if I were god, I would never allow all this suffering--"and neither would you!" I go on to tell them how decent they are and wonder why they worship a god that's not as nice as they are. Works every time.

*MarieAlena Castle is the communications director for Atheists For Human Rights (AFHR), Minneapolis, MN*

**UPCOMING JULY EVENTS**  
**CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES**

**JULY 10, 2011 (SUN.)                      12:00 NOON**  
**NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH / SPEAKER**

**SPEAKER: JAMILA BEY**



**SUBJECT: Why People of Color Resist The  
Atheist Movement**

Jamila brings more than 15 years experience reporting, editing and producing for radio stations in Pittsburgh, Washington, DC, and around the nation. After serving a decade at National Public Radio as a producer and editor, Jamila is currently a freelance journalist, and she's working on a book about Atheism in African-American Culture. A lifelong contrarian, Jamila spent much of her parochial schooling in the principal's office explaining why she was thrown out of religion class.

**LOCATION:** The Press Box Restaurant  
932 Second Avenue (bet. 49<sup>th</sup> & 50<sup>th</sup> Sts.) -2nd Floor  
**COST:** BRUNCH is \$20, which includes a selection of Buffet Entrees, salad, one soft drink, coffee, tax and tip. We encourage seconds on the delicious Eggs Benedict.

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**JULY 13, 2011 (WED.)                      7:00 PM**  
**NYC ATHEISTS LIVING W/O RELIGION  
GROUP**

**GROUP LEADER: LINDA BLAIKIE, L.C.S.W**



**SUBJECT: DAY DREAMING**

Is there such a thing as excessive day dreaming? If your daydreams lead nowhere, or consist of negative emotions like revenge, they are a dysfunctional substitute for action. Let our kind, gentle psychology guru Linda Blaikie show you how to make your daydreams lead to positive actions rather than being a substitute for action.

**LOCATION:** Moonstruck Diner - 449 Third Ave. /31<sup>St</sup>  
-2nd Floor  
**COST:** Free to members (can join at meeting if desired), but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Moonstruck for use of their space.

**JULY 19, 2011 (TUES.)                      7:00 PM**  
**NYC ATHEISTS MEETUP**

**GROUP LEADER: MICHAEL DORIAN**



**SUBJECT:** Michael Dorian, ever the feisty, provocative discussion leader, will have another exciting, au courant topic to make the discussion rock.

**LOCATION:** Stone Creek Bar and Lounge  
140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)

**COST:** Free. Participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Stone Creek for use of their space.

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**JULY 28, 2011 (THUR.)                      6:30 PM**  
**NYC ATHEISTS MONTHLY MEETING**

**SPEAKER: Dr. ADAM R. SHAPIRO**



Dr. Adam Shapiro is a historian of science and religion. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and a B.A. from Columbia.

**SUBJECT: Deity, Darwin and Intelligent Design:  
A History of the Clashes between Religion and  
Science in America.**

Professor Shapiro, in an interesting historical overview of issues in Atheism, explores the ongoing rivalry between scientific and religious ideas in the U.S. from the 19th century to the present, starting with the Natural Theologians, moving to Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" and Andrew Dickson White's subsequent declaration of a "war" between science and religion, into the 20th century, the Scopes trial and the rise of Creationism, and the most recent debates over the teaching of Intelligent Design in public schools.

**LOCATION: SLC Conference Center-352 Seventh  
Ave./16th Floor-(29/30<sup>th</sup> St.)**  
**COST:** We would appreciate a donation of \$5 to help cover the cost of room rental.

## UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

### JULY 2011

July	4 *	Mon.	10:30 AM	NYCA July 4th Barbeque
July	10**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
July	13*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
July	19*****	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
July	28****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

### AUGUST 2011

**We are on VACATION!**

NO SCHEDULED MEETINGS / EVENTS IN AUGUST

EXCEPT FOR OUR SATURDAY STREET TABLING

\*       **Grand Central Station – Main Hall – Info Kiosk**  
 \*\*       **Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th St.) – 2nd Floor**  
 \*\*\*      **Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31st) – 2nd Floor**  
 \*\*\*\*     **Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)**  
 \*\*\*\*     **SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16th Floor-(29/30th St.)**

### NYCA CABLE SHOWS

<b>Wednesdays:</b>	<b>5:30 PM</b>	<b>Atheism in History</b>	<b>(Manhattan Cable # 57)</b>
	<b>6:30 PM</b>	<b>This Week in Atheism</b>	<b>(Manhattan Cable # 57)</b>
<b>Thursdays:</b>	<b>7:00 PM</b>	<b>NYC Atheists</b>	<b>(Manhattan Cable # 67)</b>
	<b>7:30 PM</b>	<b>Atheists Book Club</b>	<b>(Manhattan Cable #67)</b>

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